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FURTHER NOTES ON THE DEATH OF A RETH OF THE SHILLUK (1945)

By W. P. G. Thomson.

These notes are intended to amplify the article "The Death of a *Reth* of the Shilluk and the Installation of his Successor" by Mr. P. P. Howell and myself published in *Sudan Notes & Records* Vol. XXVII, 1946. 121

No attempt is made to describe the ceremonies in full. The general pattern followed that of 1944 and these notes are chiefly concerned with the differences observed on this occasion, and the reasons given by the Shilluk for these differences. It was interesting to observe that in several cases where points of ceremonial differed, the procedure reverted to that of January 1918 described by Munro in *Sudan Notes & Records* Vol. I, 1918.

The disposal of the Body and Soul of Reth Anei.

The course of events was as follows:—

Reth Anei Kur died on November 10th 1945. He had been ill for some days, apparently from an attack of relapsing fever, which was prevalent among the Shilluk at the time; he was known to have a bad heart, and had in fact had a heart attack some months previously in Malakal hospital. A Shilluk medical assistant, present at Fashoda at the time of the *reth's* death, reported that he died in his arms of heart failure. This is as good evidence as we are likely to obtain that *reth* Anei died a natural death. 643

I was invited, as in 1943, to pay my last respects to the corpse. This I did on November 11th, and the scene was similar to that of 1943, but simpler. The corpse was fanned by sisters of the *reth*, and his wives were not in the house with the corpse. Several were observed outside. The reed mats were not so elaborate as in 1943 and there were no cloth curtains. 766

The corpse was not immediately buried, as happened in 1943, but was taken on the night of 11.11.45 to a small hamlet belonging to the village of Fadwol, (the village of the Bang Reth Kur — slaves of *reth* Kur, the father of Anei) some three quarters of a mile from Fashoda, and sealed up in a hut. These proceedings were naturally secret, and I was not invited to enquire into details. This method of disposing of the corpse was a reversion to tradition: there is no evidence that a [567]

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766 maiden was sealed up alive in the hut along with the corpse, which is also said to be traditional.

Fafiti Yor died in September 1943, and his funeral dance was held in November. Anei Kur died in November 1945, and his funeral dance was not held until October 1946. This longer interval was also more [643] in accord with Shilluk custom, which holds that there should be an interval of about a year between the death of a *reth* and the installation of a successor. The installation ceremonies should follow quickly upon the funeral dance for the deceased, and should take place after the harvest is ripe.

Two days before the dance, the remains of *reth* Anei were brought secretly, and by night, from Fadwol to Golbainy where his private village had been, and were buried in his house. The remains were brought by Ororo under the supervision of Gol Nyidhok, the descendants of Nyidhok, the grand father of Anei. The dance took place there and only occupied two days. It was less well attended, and the contingents not so well marshalled as in 1943, but the essential characteristics were the same, and there were the same arguments about how long it should last. The ceremonies were in the hands of the eldest son of the deceased, and of Kwanyireth Bol Acien, the chief of Lul, who had taken a large part in 1943. The chief of the Kwareth, who was senile in 1943, had died in the meantime, but his successor in office, a young man, took no part. The *reth* remained purposely in Fashoda, and did not come to Golbainy at all. It was noticed that, as bulls were slaughtered, the horns and tails were hung on to the palisade surrounding the house where *reth* Anei lay buried, and his cattle bells and other ornaments were displayed by *bangreth* in front of the tomb, spread out upon a bull skin.

The election of Reth Dak Fadiet.

643 On the death of *reth* Anei the electoral college were summoned, 66 as in 1943, by Jago Tabo of Golbainy for Gol Dhiang and Jago 631 Yorleiker of Kwom for Gol Nyikang, the two great ceremonial divisions of the Shilluk kingdom. The composition of the college was the same as in 1943, except that the chiefs of Bur Nyiliec and Owaliny Obwa could not attend owing to illness. It was clearer to me than before that the choice rests entirely with the chiefs of Gol Dhiang and Gol Nyikang. I doubt whether even the chief of the Kwareth has any influence: he and the other members of the college have only to listen to the decision.

643 *Reth* Anei had not lived long enough to adopt a *nyireth*, as *reth*

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Fafiti had done. Opinion was decided that the succession lay with the sons of Fadiet, and as the electors gathered at Fashoda, so the sons of Fadiet left their homes and came within easy reach. This was a breach of tradition, which demands that all *nyireth* at such a time should remain quietly at home. It gave rise to certain fears among the chiefs that some *nyireth* might try to instal himself in vacant Fashoda by force. There was no evidence in the event that any *nyireth* had had such an intention. 643

The sons of Fadiet were not well known to the chiefs; unlike the sons of Kur, they had a reputation for being quiet and unassertive. There was no obvious choice designated, as Anei had been designated by Fafiti. The two king-makers reduced the sons of Fadiet to a short list of four names, and waited for a lead from me, as they could not decide upon any one of these four. After my suggestion that Dak Fadiet of Falo, one of their short list, would be a good choice, the chiefs at once agreed to him. There had been rumours of bribery, as in 1917, and two bribes were known to have been offered to, and refused by, Jago Tabo of Golbainy, the chief of Gol Dhiang. One had been offered by *nyireth* Nyikang Kur, a "princess" of evil repute, who wished her uterine brother, a son of *reth* Fadiet, to succeed. It appeared from a discussion with the two kingmakers that bribery on such a solemn occasion would result in certain death for the recipient at the hands of Nyikang and was out of the question. This may be so, and would be a reasonable tribal sanction to ensure an unbiassed choice. There was a suggestion from the southern Shilluk, where most of the sons of Fadiet live, that the electoral college with its northern bias would choose a *reth* from the north. There was no sign of this, because it was agreed at once that a son of Fadiet must succeed, and no one of these sons lived north of Fashoda. The feeling in the south that the north has more influence in Fashoda probably arose because the lines of *reth* Yor and *reth* Kur both come from the north and only that of *reth* Kwathker and his son Fadiet from the south. Fashoda itself is considered to be in the northern half of the kingdom. 643 666 [649] 662 643 666 [687] 643 666 631

Dak Fadiet was initially installed, and ceremonially washed and shaved by Ororo girls in Fashoda on 18.11.45. He was followed by a large crowd of some hundreds of armed men from Gol Nyikang and particularly from his own area of Fanyidwai and all the Colo chiefs present. His following was much larger than that of Anei in 1943. The crowd may have been expressing simple gratification that at last a *reth* had come from the south; they may have been there to try and prevent a candidate from the north being installed. But the ceremony 643

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643 was completely peaceful, and the people of the villages surrounding Fashoda were not much in evidence.

The method of summoning the new *reth* was interesting. Dak like other sons of Fadiet was not far away, and the chief of Gol Nyikang sent his son by night to get him. Whether or not there is a mock fight between the selected candidate and the messengers I do not know, but the traditional form of words announcing the choice was told to me. It is an interesting example of Shilluk " understatement " when talking [195] of the *reth* (c.f. Pumphrey *Sudan Notes & Records* Vol. XXIV, p. 44) — " You are our Dinka slave, we want to kill you " which means " You are our chosen *reth*, we want to instal you in Fashoda."

It was said that the installation of *reth* Anei had been hurried and many things had been forgotten. This was interesting in view of Anei's short tenure of office, which may have been due, in Shilluk eyes, to the omission of essential ceremonies connected with the installation. It was also said, and this was true, that Anei had hurried his installation through fear, in his anxiety to get it over. The new *reth* determined that in his case there should be nothing lacking and that the proper interval of time should be allowed to elapse. That this period is a time of ritual danger, as we suggested in the previous article, was frequently confirmed in 1946. The *reth* 643 became more and more worried as the installation approached. There 669 were rumours of rivals being harboured by important chiefs, and of preparations made for his assassination. They culminated in a strong rumour that a *nyireth* had declared his intention of assassinating the *reth* on the first day of the installation ceremonies. Mr. J. C. N. Donald, who followed the *reth's* party in their march to Fashoda on that day, confirmed the *reth's* nervousness. After the installation ceremonies were safely over, I asked the *reth* about this, suggesting that his apprehensions had been ill-founded, and he admitted, for the crisis was then over, that he had never had concrete evidence of any plot.

643 The actual preparations followed similar lines to those of 1944. It appeared that it was important that the ceremonies should take [821] place on a waxing moon, and in the event this delayed the installation for about three weeks. As the time approached, there was the same apprehension that Nyikang would not start from Akurwa.

[614] On 27.12.46 Nyikang and Dak arrived at Adodo Nyigir at sunset, carried by Kwanyikwom, the sacred clan from Akurwa who always have this duty. They entered the village, as they had done in 1944, over the body of a black sheep, and after dancing round the village, they went into the same house. They had come, as before, after

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beating the bounds of Shilluk land at Moro, north of Kaka. The details of their progress were similar to that of 1944. 643

The only observed difference between the preliminaries for Nyikang's journey was the embassy to Fanyikang to get *dom* fibre for the ceremonial ropes. This year it was performed by 'Anongo,' one of the uncrowned sons of Nyikang, and not by Dak as in 1944. The embassy this year only went to the *dom* palm forest at Obai Dego, which is 15 miles downstream of Fanyikang.

On 28.12.46 the *reth* was still at Fashoda, and not yet fled to Debalo Kwom. It was expected that he would go before dawn on 29.12.46. Fashoda was full of his personal supporters from the southern Shilluk. I noticed that the *reth* had apparently made friends with the *nyireth* whom he had recently suspected of trying to ambush him.

The *reth* started for Debalo secretly at about 3.00 a.m. on 29.12.46. After resting half way, he entered Debalo, after the village had ceremonially resisted him three times. He stepped over a black sheep, held by Ororo. When he entered, his supporters all broke into one of the songs of Nyikang. This was a mistake, as the whole proceeding should have been secret. The *reth* stayed at the same broken down house as in 1944, and the same royal house was prepared, and left empty.

Jago Yorleiker, the chief of Gol Nyikang, was in charge of the ceremonies. All the fires had been put out before the *reth's* arrival, and preparations had been made to light new fire by the ceremonial method of *pic mac*. This method is later used at Fashoda and is described in our previous article (op. cit. p. 65). A bull was brought by Jago Yorleiker, which was to be speared when the *reth* came out of seclusion to be greeted by the assembled chiefs of Gol Nyikang in the evening. The chiefs of Gol Dhiang had no business in Debalo, and if they came, they would come as observers. Some sheep were brought by self-confessed adulterers. The *reth* insisted that only adulterers whose cases had not previously been opened could avail themselves of this privilege of amnesty, but in the event a few men tried to avoid a judgment debt by paying a sheep. There is some confusion about the ownership of these sheep. It seems clear that they belong to the *reth*, but are presented by him to the chief of Debalo Kwom (himself the chief of Gol Nyikang) as a recognition for his services in sheltering the *reth* in Debalo. In 1944 the chief of Gol Nyikang appropriated the sheep without permission.

That evening the drums of Nyikang were heard from Nyigir, and the *reth's* drums from Debalo. The procession carrying the sacred beads *Ocoro* from Lul arrived at about 8.00 p.m.

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643 The next day December 30th, *Adul*, the temporary camp outside Fashoda, was built by Jago Yorleiker. This time he built both huts, and the chief of Gol Dhiang had no part.

On the 31st the *reth* and Nyikang were ready for the installation ceremonies. Nyikang and his army left Nyigir at about 9.00 a.m. and went straight to the village north of Fashoda, where they had to wait some two hours for the *reth* to start from Debalo. The army of Nyikang moved steadily this time and seldom turned back in countermarch as it had done in 1944. The *reth* was delayed ceremonially till about midday. His form of procession was similar to 1944, and the cattle which were bride-wealth for Nyakwer were observed being driven along beside his army.

There had been an abnormal White Nile flood in 1946, as in 1917 at the time of the installation of *reth* Fafiti, and the Khor Arepajur, which was dry in March 1944, was now an expanse of water about 80 yards wide. When the *reth* arrived at the khor, the *Golbainy* dragged the small black bull to the southern bank. The *reth*, taking Nyakwer by the hand, stepped over the bull and into a canoe. He was paddled across the khor with Nyakwer sitting behind him, while his followers forded the stream.

As the two parties of Nyikang and the *reth* approached each other Nyikang dashed forward and captured the *reth* without a struggle and began at once to carry him off to Cerfuc (op. cit. p.p. 61 & 78) Fashoda. This corresponded with Munro's observation in 1918 (*Sudan Notes & Records* Vol. I), but not with what we had seen in 1944, when there had been a spectacular mock battle with millet stalks. I was told that they had "made a mistake" in 1944, and also that owing to the hardness of the millet stalks they were afraid of injuring someone. This latter reason had not cancelled the fight in 1944. There is another possible reason: the *reth* himself was feeling in a state of acute personal danger, owing, as he thought, to the likelihood of someone making an attack on his life. He may have issued orders at the last moment that the battle was not to take place, in case someone should take advantage of the confusion to attack him. This seems more possible because the *reth's* army were all carrying millet stalks as they crossed the khor, as if in preparation for the mock battle.

643 The rest of the ceremonies closely followed precedent. *Reth* Dak, while enthroned on the stool was "possessed" by Nyikang, in the same way as *reth* Anei had been. He was afterwards led away to seclusion in *Adul* leading Nyakwer by the hand. An incident which may be of interest occurred while the *reth* was being led to *Adul*. The

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sheep over which he had to step on entering *Adul*, defaecated on the way. The man holding the sheep picked up the droppings and rubbed them on the sheep's back. After he had done so he made gestures showing that he had restored the situation, indicating that the sheep was no longer defiled.

For the following account of the final ceremonies I am indebted to Mr. H. A. Nicholson, then Deputy Governor Upper Nile, with whom I witnessed them.

The final ceremonies of the installation of the new *reth* of the Shilluk took place at Fashoda on 3rd and 4th January. This time there were no large crowds, but only the chiefs and leading notables and the attendants of Nyikang and the *reth*.

On the evening of the 2nd, the *reth* had come out of the special grass hut into which he had been led with the small girl, his symbolic bride, Nyakwer, ' the girl of the ceremonies,' after the spirit of Nyikang had entered into him and he had been ritually seated on the sacred stool or throne. He had come out to go up into Athudowic, the hill of the throne, the great mound which dominates Fashoda, on which are set the four sacred houses which constitute the shrine of the Shilluk kings. With him was a girl, but it was not his bride. In accordance with tradition her place had been taken by a girl of the Ororo clan who had enticed him away. Next morning, when he discovered this, the *reth* sent out to search for his wife, and eventually learnt that she had been taken by Nyikang to his shrine. He sent envoys to ask for her return, and when Nyikang refused, he came out, stepped over a sheep, marched down the hill with his army, stepped over a grey-white bull and challenged Nyikang to battle. Nyikang's drum was then heard, sounding a distinctive beat, the lion call, and Nyikang accompanied by his sons Dak and Cal (a smaller figure made of the grey feathers of a female ostrich) came out from his shrine at the head of his army. After marching round his shrine, from right to left, he advanced to meet the *reth* and his party, who were waiting on the open ground in the middle of the village. Twice Nyikang advanced towards the *reth* and retired again to march round the shrine, while his drum sounded a new insistent beat. The third time the armies joined battle armed with millet stalks, and also, in the case of Nyikang's men, with special rope whips. This time the *reth* prevailed, and seizing Nyakwer who was with Nyikang's army, drew her with him at a run up into the hill, while Nyikang and his men withdrew to his shrine at the other side of the village.

Next morning the stage was set for the last act, the *kel long*

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643 *tiny*, the planting of the spear in the ground, when the new *reth* appeared before the chiefs and notables, received their homage and addresses of exhortation, and in reply gave his undertaking to be a good and just ruler and to work for the welfare of the Shilluk people. The ceremony was simple but impressive. First of all the chiefs and [516] leading notables lined up near the base of the hill, squatting on the ground with their legs tucked beneath them in the decorous and respectful manner which is distinctive of the Shilluk. Behind them was a similar group of men of lesser importance. Then Nyikang's shield with bells on it, (which is said to be of silver), his long spear, and his throne (the *kwom*), all wrapped in new white cloth to conceal them from the gaze of ordinary men, and his drum, were brought out and taken to the bottom of the hill in front of the waiting chiefs. Here the throne was set up on a giraffe skin. Shortly afterwards the *reth* appeared, clad in a white *lau*, and wearing the royal skin of the female Mrs. Gray antelope, and a new ivory armlet, which had been specially made for the occasion. After stepping over a sheep, he walked down the hill accompanied by Nyikwor and a small party of attendants, and protected by the royal fan made of the wings of the saddle bill stork in the form of a shield. When he reached the throne, he was lifted on to it by two men of the Ororo. The bearer of the fan held it over the *reth's* head to protect him from the sun, while the bearers of the shield, spear and drum stood in front. When all was 537 ready, the shield-bearer advanced towards the rows of chiefs shaking 643 the shield so that the bells jingled, and marked out the first speaker. This was Yor Leiker, the chief of the south, on whom together with Jago Tabo, the chief of the north, who spoke second, had lain the main responsibility for the choice of the new *reth*. These two were followed by some two dozen others, ending up with the chiefs of Tonga and Mwomo (Kaka), the wardens of southern and northern marches. The speeches took the form of exhortations to the new *reth* to deal justly with his people without fear or favour, that the spirit of Nyikang was in him and the people looked to him for good crops and good fortune. And as each speaker finished he stabbed his spear into the ground and left it there. When a speech met with approval, it was acknowledged by the shield bearer and the drummer coming forward and walking round the speaker shaking the bells and beating the drum respectively. When these speeches were over, the *reth* rose up and addressed the company, went over to the bull and stabbed it, and returned once more with his party into Athudowic.

643 The ritual was over. The new *reth* was secure in the occupation

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of his throne, the spirit of the divine Nyikang, which had been as it were in suspension since the last *reth* Anei Kur had passed over a year ago, had entered into Dak Fadiet, and once again the Shilluk people could resume their normal life.

NOTES.

1. *The body of Nyikang.*

It was explained in our previous article that the body of Nyikang consisted of a bundle of bamboos brought from the Nuba Mountains. I now believe that this is not the case and that only Dak's body is of bamboo. It is more likely that the bundle is of ambatch, indeed this is generally believed. The Shilluk believe that the soul of a mortal can pass into a stick of ambatch, and I am informed by Dr. J. A. Heasty that if a Shilluk dies away from his home his relatives hold a ceremony to make his soul pass into a stick of ambatch, which they take back to his village and bury there.

2. *The vigil of the Beads 'Ocoro,' which are tied on to the reth's ankle.*

I interviewed the old *nyireth* who is responsible for these beads. She was reluctant to tell me much, and refused to show me the beads. I asked her, for she had great experience of these matters, how it came that some beads appeared with holes in them, and she told me that as she sat over them at night the ones which appear with holes went 'pop.' She told me that four had appeared with holes for *reth* Fafiti in 1918, and one for *reth* Anei and five for *reth* Dak. She said four or five were about right, one was too few, and more than five was too many. The beads with holes are tied on to the *reth's* ankle only during the ceremonies, and after that they apparently close up.

3. *Nyakwer.*

It was not clear in 1944 what became of Nyakwer. It now appeared that she became *bareth*, i.e. will become a wife of the *reth* when she grows up. The girl who was Nyakwer in 1944 still lives in Fashoda, and is now about 13 years old. There was of course a different girl in 1946.

4. *Fashoda.*

The sacred village of Fashoda was most beautifully cleaned and repaired for the installation. All the houses had had their fences renewed, and courtyards replastered with mud, though none of them was rebuilt. The whole of the mound on which the royal shrine of

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Athudowic stands had been plastered with smooth mud from top to bottom.

5. *Fanyikang.*

As in 1944 the sacred shrine of Nyikang at Fanyikang was thrown down and rebuilt after the ceremonies.